

Parsnip--An Undiscovered Star

Includes Recipe Below

Still an ingenue waiting to be discovered in this country, the parsnip is a deliciously impressive performer in the fall, winter, and spring kitchens of Europe. Famous chefs reveal that "she's" easily prepared for diverse roles when brought to the table as an appetizer, soup, salad, or side dish. Sweet and delicate best describes the parsnip's outstanding flavors, while starchy, smooth, and light characterize its texture. Because of its starchy nature, the parsnip can easily stand-in for potatoes in meal planning.

A root vegetable, the parsnip is a member of the umbelliferae family whose other members include carrots, chervil, parsley, fennel, celery, and celeriac. The parsnip may be unfamiliar to you, yet its long history recites that it was cultivated during Roman times. During the Middle Ages tastier and fleshier varieties were developed. A variety of wild parsnip grew over much of Central and Southern Europe and has been introduced into the British Isles and Northern Europe, but the cultivated varieties are sweeter and appear more plump.

Because they store so well above ground as well as underground, parsnips are available year round. However, to enjoy the best of their flavors, the optimal season is fall through spring. Farmers plant the tiny seeds in the spring. Then the crop requires a patient three or four months to mature. Past experience taught the farmers that leaving the parsnips in the ground until late fall allowed their starches to turn to sugars. Some farmers even leave the parsnips in the ground all winter with the belief that these produce the sweetest crop.

Commercial farmers use the refrigerator to bring about the conversion of starch to sugar by harvesting the parsnips in the late fall and keeping them at 32 to 34 degrees for about two weeks.

A bit of folklore centers around the parsnip's ideal harvesting times. One myth says parsnips left in the ground over winter are poisonous. Another says that harvesting parsnips before the first frost causes them to be poisonous. Neither is true, of course, but folklore makes good conversation. However, for those of you who plan to stalk the wild parsnip, **beware!** The water hemlock, also a member of the same botanical family, looks very much like the wild parsnip, and it is **poisonous**.



Nutritionally, parsnips are low in calories, about 130 for a whole one 9" in length, and contain no saturated fat or cholesterol. That same 9" parsnip can boast a 6.4 grams of fiber, 93.1 mcg of folic acid (that's nothing to sneeze at), 59.2 mg of calcium, and 46.4 mg of potassium, and lesser amounts of vitamins B1, B2, B3, vitamin C, iron, and zinc.

When shopping for parsnips use the same criteria as for carrots. Select only firm parsnips. Those that are limp are not fresh. Choose them small, medium, or large, but avoid those that are overly large as they sometimes have a woody core.

Store raw parsnips in the refrigerator, preferably in a perforated plastic bag. They will keep well up to three weeks. After cooking, refrigerate only a day or two.

Parsnips are easy to prepare, and you'll be well rewarded by their superb flavors. Following are some preparation suggestions:

RAW:

Peel a parsnip, shred it, and add it to a salad. Its flavor is very mild and won't intrude on your greens, but you'll be adding nutritional benefits to your salad.

STEAMED, BOILED, BRAISED:

Peel and thickly slice parsnips for adding to long-cooking bean or grain stews.

Peel parsnips. Then slice and add to soups early in the cooking stage for a delicately sweet flavor surprise.

Peel parsnips. Then slice and steam in a small amount of water for 10 to 12 minutes to use as a side dish.

SAUTEED:

Peel and shred parsnips. Saute in a wok or skillet with a small amount of extra virgin olive oil and a little water until tender, about 7 to 10 minutes.

Dice peeled parsnips and carrots, and saute in a skillet with a little olive oil and water. Add a little lemon juice, wine, and seasonings and enjoy a tasty side dish.

ROASTED:

Peel parsnips and slice in half lengthwise. Toss in a little extra virgin olive oil and spread out on a lightly oiled baking pan. Roast in a 400 oven for 25 to 35 minutes, turning frequently to avoid sticking and burning. Season if desired.

PARSNIPS TO PONDER

When you begin with a vegetable rich in flavor like the parsnip, it's best to keep the preparation simple and allow its flavors to be fully appreciated.

2 lbs. (1 kg) fresh parsnips, peeled
Water

1 to 2 T. extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Sprinkle of ground nutmeg
Garnish with a sprig of carrot tops

1. Cut parsnips into 1/2" (1 cm) chunks and put into a 2-quart (2 liter) saucepan with 1/2" (1 cm) of water.
2. Cover, and bring to a boil over high heat.
3. Turn heat down to low and steam 8 to 12 minutes or until fork tender.
4. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to a food processor or blender, reserving cooking water.
5. Add olive oil and process until pureed, adding some of the cooking water if needed to make a smooth puree. Season to taste. Turn out into a serving bowl.
6. Sprinkle very lightly with nutmeg and garnish with carrot tops. Serves 6 as a side dish.